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Ethics of Artificial Intelligence

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AI Ethics Field Guide

In social media contexts, AI-driven recommendation systems make manipulative choices by algorithmically shaping attention and habits, especially affecting users' capacity for reflective choice and autonomy.

In everyday digital spaces, AI tools constantly work to shape what people think about, see, and choose, often without users' consent or awareness. A great example of this challenge is TikTok's recommendation algorithm. TikTok uses AI to keep track of user habits such as watch time, pauses, likes, and replays, then promptly organizes a personalized "For You" page designed to keep each user entertained and engaged (TikTok, 2023; Wall Street Journal, 2021). This system appears to be convenient, but it raises serious ethical concerns about manipulation and autonomy.

The ethical problem lies in how the algorithm redirects users' attention and behavior. Instead of just responding to user choices, the system nudges users toward content that optimizes user engagement. It does this by utilizing psychological vulnerabilities like social validation, emotional reactivity, and addiction (Zuboff, 2019). This undermines human agency by influencing users' preferences and behaviors without their informed consent. Users believe that they are manipulating their algorithms freely, when in reality they choose from filtered options

that are prioritized by obscure AI systems optimized for profit (Center for Humane Technology, 2021).

This case is ethically challenging because it creates a tension between autonomy and convenience. Meanwhile, personalized content can amplify user experience, but it also risks treating people as means to an end. People are being seen as data sources for advertising profit, rather than as autonomous agents that have the ability to make reflective choices (Frankfurt, 1971). The moral concern is not that AI just influences habits, but that it is done so seamlessly, making intentional consent and resistance almost impossible.

Two second-half questions:

- When do AI-driven nudges cross the moral line from assisting user choice to undermining autonomous decision-making, especially when users are unaware of how their behavior is being shaped?

- What counts as meaningful consent in AI-mediated environments where personalization is constant and opting out of algorithmic influence is difficult or unrealistic?

AI Use Disclosure

Tool used;

ChatGPT (OpenAI)

What we used it for;

To make sure our final paper was clearly and concisely written, we used AI for plain language revision and grammatical error checks.

What we changed or verified;

Without changing our original content's voice or its integrity, we changed the confusing wording and poor grammar in our rough draft with the help of AI.

References

- Center for Humane Technology. (2021). *How social media hacks our brains.*
- Frankfurt, H. (1971). *Freedom of the will and the concept of a person.*
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- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism.*